



An Investigation of Academic and Professional Aspects of Training Programmes for Iraqi Primary EFL Teachers

KEYWORDS

pre-service and in-service training, constraints, Iraqi primary EFL teachers, Communicative Approach

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ABSTRACT *This paper was to provide much deeper perspective of the EFL, teacher education programme in Iraq, including both the University-Institute and the in-service English teacher training programmes. Teacher education consists of two main programmes: pre-service and in-service training. The researcher's approach to data was qualitative to gain in-depth understanding of educational phenomena, and to explore in-depth, personal views of those involved in the EFL teacher education programme, such as their learning and teaching experiences. Participants were Iraqi in-service English teachers in Babylon Governorate who attended in-service training programmes. The findings suggest that the challenge represented in the Communicative Approach underpinning the syllabus design and teaching materials is not well addressed in either the EFL teacher education programme or the actual practices of EFL teaching and learning. Teachers' attitudes towards their education are negative because of the constraints such as traditional methods used during their pre-service courses and training procedures.*

INTRODUCTION

IRAQ, had witnessed the birth and prosperity of several civilizations on its land: the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations witnessed flourishing the first forms of social, political and economic organizations. After the establishment of the Republic of Iraq in 1958, interest in education increased and was reflected in all its stages, where there have been several attempts to spread the primary education in all parts of the country. After the establishment of the Republic of Iraq in 1958, interest in education increased and was reflected in all its stages, where there have been several attempts to spread the primary education in all parts of the country. These attempts, however, stumbled for several reasons, including Political instability and lack of accurate calculations project costs and monitoring with adequate funds and others [1]. But after 2003, the new Iraqi government increases its focus on improving education through increasing the financial and scientific supports to this vital sector through updating curricula and rehabilitation of destroyed schools and building others.

Iraq, as with many other countries, realized the importance of introducing English in the early stages at the primary level to give pupils more time to learn English, i. e. 10 instead of 8 years. In 2005, the Iraqi Ministry of Education made the decision to teach English from third grade with new curriculum (Iraq Opportunities) at the primary stage and it was to take effect from September 2007-2008. The training of teachers to implement successfully the new curriculum and the intended approach i.e, the communicative approach is crucial to any educational institution. Even more important is the actual context of the training programmes. Thus, this paper aimed to provide much deeper perspective of the EFL, teacher education programme, including both the University-Institute and the in-service English teacher training programmes. The first section devoted to give a brief review about the two types of the training programmes i.e. pre-service-and in service programmes in Iraq, started with an outlook on the educational system.

EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN IRAQ

The formal school system in Iraq starts with two years in kindergarten followed by the other three basic levels, namely primary, intermediate, and preparatory. Apart from the kindergarten level, this system is still the same introduced during the British Mandatory Period.

TRAINING PROGRAMMES IN IRAQ

At the primary level, teachers of English are prepared to be specialized in teaching the subject. They are graduates of Primary Teachers' Training Institutes, College of Basic Education, and Educational Courses.

PRE-SERVICE PROGRAMMES

i. PRIMARY TEACHERS' TRAINING INSTITUTES

In commenting on the pre-service training of teachers of foreign languages, [2] focuses on what he believes to be a number of critical aspects of that training:

Pre-service teacher education and training determines not just the quality of future in-service teachers, but also the character of education as a whole. Teaching a foreign language is difficult, demanding training which addresses pedagogical understanding, target language grammatical knowledge, oral proficiency, and target culture awareness [emphasis added].

Rausch (2001:1)

[3] notes that although pre-service courses, however good, "cannot normally produce fully competent practitioners who can immediately vie with their experienced colleagues in expertise", in the absence of effective pre-service courses, teachers are likely to perpetuate the way in which they were taught or the way in which colleagues teach, having "little opportunity to encounter new ideas, to benefit from progress made in the field by other professionals, researchers and thinkers, or to develop personal theories of action through systematic study and experiment".

At the primary level, teachers of English are prepared to be specialized in teaching the subject. They are graduates of Primary Teachers' Training Institutes, College of Basic Education, and Educational Courses. In the following sections, reference will be made to the places of graduation for teachers of English in Iraqi primary schools. The Ministry of Education shares responsibility with the Ministry of Higher Education for providing primary school teachers who are graduates with one of the following institutes and Colleges:

ii. COLLEGES OF BASIC EDUCATION (PREVIOUSLY CENTRAL PRIMARY TEACHERS' INSTITUTES)

This Institute enrolls secondary school graduates for a two-

year programme in general education to prepare them for teaching in Iraqi primary schools. In the academies year 1992/1993, this two-year programme was converted to be colleges for teachers of university level with four years studying period under the name College of Teachers where teachers in the country are educated, runs a pre-service programme to prepare education majors to teach English at the primary stage as one of the different subjects being taught in those colleges.

iii. COLLEGES OF EDUCATION

Students enroll at these colleges on the completion of their studies at the preparatory level, scientific and literary branches. Some primary school teachers get admission to these colleges to be specialized in the teaching of one subject after graduation.

iv. OPEN COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

In order to encourage primary school teachers to upgrade their qualifications through distance education, The target groups of the Open College are primary teachers with a diploma from a two-year or five-year teacher training institute, primary education teachers with only a diploma from preparatory school, and primary education teachers with a university degree in a non-teaching-related subject.

IN-SERVICE PROGRAMMES

In-service training is the type of training a teacher undergoes while in the teaching service. [4] gives the following definition:

[In-service training] is taken to include all those courses and activities in which a serving teacher may participate for the purpose of extending his professional knowledge, interest or skill. Preparation for a degree, diploma or other qualification subsequent to initial training is included within this definition.

In-service training is usually shorter and narrower in scope. It mainly aims at reinforcing teachers' pre-service acquired knowledge and skills. A second aim of these courses is to compensate for the proficiency and adequate teaching techniques that teachers fail to grasp during their pre-service training courses. Those in-service training courses, as [5] points out, enable teachers to acquire an extent of proficiency to meet a wide range of variations in pupils' backgrounds. Those in-service programmes are called "supporting programme", whereby teachers are gathered for a defined period. The aim was eventually to include all teachers in this programme, which is supervised by the English Unit and were prepared according to the supervisors' notes made during their field visits to teachers and their assessment of trainees' needs, such as how to prepare for lessons.

THE STUDY OBJECTIVE

The study was addressed in more depth to achieve the following objective:

- To identify the process of teachers' preparation for ELT
- To get a wider understanding of the whole picture of the EFL teacher programme with its different dimensions.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

• THE SAMPLE

Participants in this phase of the study included 35 in-service teachers who attended in-service training programmes. In those programmes, there were also teachers who have been selected by local supervisors to present public lessons following by reflections and discussions among participating teachers.

• THE TOOLS

In this study, a focus group interview with 35 in-service teachers, and observation of the in-service training programmes were used to collect the data. During the interview, the re-

searcher leads the discussion and encourages participants to exchange ideas and discuss issues among themselves [6]. In the case of my research, individual interviews, and focus interviews were conducted.

• DATA ANALYSIS

The analyses of the observation data based on the categories with verbatim quotations from teachers' interviews. Teachers' general views on the their education and training programmes as well as related concerns based discussions from both the teachers who taught the lessons and those who observed the lessons during the in-service training programmes. Three main categories emerged from the observation and interview data analysis as follows:

- 1) Teachers' perceptions of pre-service training programmes
- 2) Teachers' perceptions of In-service training programmes
- 3) Difficulties teachers face in their training programmes:

FINDINGS

The number of teachers who attended the in-service programmes which I observed ranged between 40 and more than 150 in-service English teachers. The main results presented by topic/theme, and teachers' responses to each question presented quantitatively showing for each question the frequency counts of those who gave the same answer. Results also are presented qualitatively as quotations from the actual interview data.

• TEACHERS' EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

An overwhelming majority of the teachers who participated in this part of the study were females, with average 30 (85%); The **age groups** fell between 30-39 and 50 and above with, (34 %) in their 30s, (29%) in their 40s, (23%) in their 20s and (14%) in 50s and above; **Teaching Experience:** Their primary English teaching experience ranged from 3-4 years to over 20 years. However, (42%) of them had between 10-19 years of primary teaching experience. With (31%) and (14%) having had 5-9 years or 20 and above of teaching experience, just (11%) of the teachers had 3-4 years of experience in teaching English in primary schools; **Qualification Degrees:** All teachers held degrees above the level of a training courses certificate which is the minimum qualification requirement from the Ministry of Education to teach English in primary schools. 85% of the respondents held a Diploma degree in English Language Teaching, 15% held B.Ed. degree in English Language; **Regarding Training:** 100% reported that they had received some kind of in-service training during the past two years. Among those who received training; (85%) had training on the new textbooks; (69%) attended and listened to oral English lectures on how to teach; (57%) had training by observing lessons and (37%) had training on the new curriculum.

• TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF PRE-SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAMME

Although all of the participants claimed that their pre-service programme included a methodology component, the coverage of that component of the pre-service programmes appears to have varied widely and the general view was that,

The Methodology Components: Although all of the respondents claimed that their pre-service programme included a methodology component, the coverage of that component of the pre-service programmes appears to have varied widely and the general view was that, irrespective of coverage, this component had little of practical value to offer trainees. 15% of those who attended a four degree University programme claimed that the primary emphasis was on theory; and 85% who did a five year degree pre-service programme at Teachers Training Institutes claimed that they had learned more from other trainees than they had from their tutors. None of the respondents could recall being taught anything of any practical use in the area of concept introduction, concept checking or integrated skills teaching.

More than 80% participants who claimed to have been taught about the teaching of pronunciation, most of them had no memory of what had been included in this area and they indicated that this part of their programme had been of little practical use.

Many teachers relate the way they learned English to the way they teach English under the current situation. However, 78% of the teachers pointed out that the way they had learned Arabic helped them in learning English, because students were trained from the very beginning to learn how to memorize. The characteristics of this Arabic method of learning fit well into the English grammar translation method used by teachers. 97% of the respondents indicated that recitation and memorization were common practices in Iraqi pre-service classrooms. As one teacher expressed her experience of learning English:

I used to learn most of the English text book by heart in order to be able to speak the language because at that time the materials were very limited

(A teacher, Focus Interview)

Language Proficiency: Even the focus on language proficiency is only partial, since it places great emphasis on the teachers' mastery of the grammar of language. 88% admitted that they have been taught grammar explicitly. Pre-service training of teachers of English in Iraq has been criticized by more than 83% of the respondents for over-emphasizing general educational background at the expense of language proficiency. They expressed an urgent need for more training mainly in teaching methods and spoken English. 87% frankly indicated that it was related to their poor background concerning the use of the language in real life and 13% of the respondents related that to lack of opportunity to meet English native speakers. As one teacher commented:

I think I didn't learn a lot from the University because what is learnt at the University is not applicable to the classroom where I believe the classroom is the kitchen where we cook the meal and taste it with the student. Ready meals cooked by the University people are not always good.

(A teacher, Interview)

Teachers discussed how English is learned through listening and speaking. 34% emphasized the importance of speaking. While 66% of the respondents agreed that listening and speaking are very important for learning English.

The Use of Communicative Approach: It was noted in earlier chapters that the revised curriculum guidelines for English in Iraqi schools recommends a communicative approach to the teaching of English. In this context, 95% of the respondents stressed that training programmes should help trainees to understand what is meant by 'communicative language teaching' in relation to the Iraqi curriculum and should provide trainees with ways of putting this understanding into practice in relevant teaching contexts.

It is interesting to note that 56% of the teachers involved in this study, reported that they rely heavily on their existing skills as teachers rather than on what they learned during their Pre-service training courses. This suggests that teacher trainers in Iraq may need to bear in mind that "preconceptions are remarkably resistant to change unless awareness of . . . prior learning is developed in the teacher education programme".

Mostly, all the respondents agreed that learning a foreign language needed critical thinking and realized that current methods used to teach English in Universities and teacher training Institutes are not efficient.

TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF IN-SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAMMES

The in-service training are available to teachers in the form generally of workshop, seminars, and observing lessons offered by local government. Although these in-service courses and others concerned the use of new textbooks, TEFL methodology were often considered useful by participants in this survey, particularly where they were taught by practicing teachers, and although they sometimes covered areas that appear to have been neglected in pre-service training, such as coping with learners with differing levels of proficiency, it was not felt that they could make up for the perceived deficiencies of pre-service training.

The Programme Component: 77% of the respondents did not see that the courses may not be entirely successful in meeting teachers' needs, whether because they are too short or too theoretical and divorced from teachers' classroom experience. It is also worth noting that 94% of the teachers indicated that there was any training to improve teachers' substantive knowledge, for example, spoken English, although this was one of the main needs expressed by teachers.

The Use of Communicative Approach: Even so, there was evidence from the observed programmes and public lessons a considerable uncertainty among the participants about communicative language teaching (CLT). 78% of the participants said that they had attended in-service programme that included reference to CLT. Furthermore, one of the respondents appeared to think of CLT as a specific methodology rather than as an approach which could include a range of methodologies. This appears to be the most likely explanation for her claim that

Furthermore, 23% of the respondents who had attended the in-service programme agreed that it had had a very positive impact on teaching and would recommend training courses to all teachers of English in Iraqi primary schools, believing that such a course would not only help them to become more effective teachers, and to work more efficiently, thus saving time in the long run.

Thus, although in-service training is available, there is a doubt as to how well it supports English teachers' development, due to the brevity and limited scope of courses, and the possible mismatch between course content and teachers' needs.

DIFICULTIES TEACHERS FACE IN PRE-AND-IN-SERVICE PROGRAMMES

When the participants were asked about the difficulties that they faced, they provided a range on the educational issues.

Adjusting the New Approach to the Iraqi Context: 71% of the respondents reflected the range of difficulties towards the current situation of teaching EFL in Iraqi Classrooms and the implementation of the new approach. They required solving these problems and adjusting the communicative language teaching to the Iraqi context since context plays the key role to develop the EFL teachers' programme

Classroom Management: Though teachers are asked to teach, 64% from participants indicated that they lack training on how to manage large sized classes.

The Mismatch Between Theory and Practice: 92% of the participants included the gaps between school and university, the gulf between the university-based experience and the practical world of schools. The participants were not satisfied with the balance of theory and practice or the interaction between the two.

Although in theory student teachers read about methods of language teaching and learning, they do not see progressive approaches, e. g. the communicative approach, used in the university lectures. This highlights the gap between theory

and practice. As one teacher quoted:

Do we read theories in books in order to keep them in our minds and that's it or do we have to apply and act upon them in the classroom. What we need is to have more practice because we have enough theories.

(A teacher, Focus Interview)

This leaves student teachers in a perplexed situation where they are asked to do things they are not aware of, while being expected to act as responsible teachers. This in turn creates a gap between theory and practice.

... They [University teachers] just pour out theories that have no relationship to the actual reality. They are concerned about lecturing, and that is it. They don't know how we live at schools like us because they don't visit schools regularly.

(A Teacher, Focus Interview)

CONCLUSION

The results indicated that the aims of the pre-service programmes focused on two aspects: linguistic competence and professional preparation. Nothing has been mentioned about the philosophy behind the approach used for EFL teacher education. Linguistic competence was considered to be a major goal for the teaching profession. These findings confirm the results of empirical and theoretical studies which indicated that attention has not been given to the practical aspects. [3] points out that student-teachers need to be instructed on both pedagogic and linguistic matters since such knowledge is unattainable incidentally by analogy with their own education as students, the discouraging behaviour of some head teachers (English supervisors) and teachers of English at the schools where a trainee's teaching-practice is taking place is negatively influential.

The findings revealed a limited understanding of communicative language teaching, so it is important that teachers should have a repertoire of useful classroom language. As it was noted in that the revised curriculum guidelines for English in Iraqi schools recommends a communicative approach

to the teaching of English. In this context, it is stressed that in-service training programmes should help in-service teachers to understand what is meant by 'communicative language teaching' in relation to the Iraqi curriculum and should provide them with ways of putting this understanding into practice in relevant teaching contexts.

The results elaborated on the respondents' views and emphasizes that the classroom atmosphere should provide the opportunities required in the implementation of the new approach. The results of the data analysis indicated that most of the respondents' responses were critical of the curriculum materials and the facilities available for teacher education and training at the University and the schools. At the university level, participants also criticized the lack of the provision of the up-to-date curriculum materials and professional development resources. Respondents also were critical of the use of the language laboratory, as there were inadequacies in these facilities for EFL training.

Findings obtained from both the data analysis highlighted a series of gaps that contributed to the convergence between theory and practice. The range of difficulties recorded by the study highlight the existence of these gaps. Examples include the gap between school and university, the gulf between the university-based experience and the practical world of schools.

Difficulties generated a series of conflicts that affect the EFL teacher education programme. These are at two levels: conflict in theory and conflict in practice. Examples of conflict in theory include the clash between the teaching syllabus and the examination procedures, which induces a conflict between the educational thrust of communicative classroom teaching that values spoken fluency and communication and the examination procedures, which assess accuracy in transmitting the knowledge. Findings concerning the role of in the gap between theory and practice confirm the research findings both in mainstream education and language teaching tradition. The research emphasized that theories cannot be transformed into action because of the difficulties with which they clash [7],[8]

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